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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR GUTMAN'S NOVEMBER 9 MEETING WITH  
BELGIAN MINISTER FOR DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION CHARLES MICHEL

Classified By: Ambassador Howard Gutman, reason 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. Summary: The Ambassador paid an initial courtesy call on Charles Michel, Belgium's Minister for Development Cooperation, on November 9. Michel's ministry creates policy and oversees administration of a large part of Belgium's official development assistance to Afghanistan, Central Africa and other regions of interest to the USG. The meeting was the first for the Embassy in more than a year with the Minister. Michel expressed pleasure at the election of President Obama and welcomed cooperation with the Embassy and the USG in Washington. He agreed with the importance of combating sexual violence in the Eastern Congo and noted that elections in the region create opportunities to promote human rights and development. He termed Belgium a "faithful partner" of the U.S. on Afghanistan, calling on the U.S. to ensure that the new Afghan government is more honest and efficient, and expressed concern about the safety of humanitarian aid workers there. Michel expressed hope that the Obama administration can find a new path to peace in the Middle East. The Ambassador urged Belgium to take on a leadership role in Europe on issues such as Afghanistan, Guantanamo, Central Africa and others. Michel ended the meeting without a meaningful response to that idea, but said he looks forward to continuing contact with the Ambassador. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Michel said that while Belgium is a small country, it is a comparatively wealthy one and as such can have an impact on world economic development. For example, he said, Belgium is playing a leading role in the EU, especially on Africa assistance issues. Re-emphasizing the small size of Belgium, he said that a multilateral approach is important. Michel welcomed the election of President Obama and said that he has high hopes for a better and more fruitful relationship with the Obama administration. Belgium, he said, is impressed with the President's achievements so far. Belgium is ready to do its part in Afghanistan, in closing Guantanamo prison, and in other areas, he concluded.

¶3. (C) Belgium has a special, historic relationship and expertise in Central Africa, Michel said. A strong and continuing conversation among the United States, Belgium, the EU and the Central African countries themselves is necessary for creating peace in the region. He added that he is especially appreciative of Secretary Clinton's commitment to fight sexual violence in the Eastern Congo and elsewhere. Noting that the United States has a close relationship with Rwanda and that Belgium has a good working relationship with the Congo, he said that working together makes good sense. One complicating factor in the region, he said, is that

elections are coming up soon in all four countries in the region, the DRC, Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda. Thus it is a "fragile" but important time for promoting human rights and development. He said he welcomes regular contact with the U.S. Embassy in Brussels to share our analysis of the situation there.

¶4. (C) Michel insisted that Belgium is a committed and faithful partner of the U.S. in achieving security in Afghanistan. Belgium's approach is coordinated among the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and his own Ministry of Development Cooperation. Although Belgium has limited military and civilian resources, it wants to continue cooperating with the United States. Michel said he is interested to know more about the U.S. approach to ensuring the safety of humanitarian workers in the country. He is also concerned that even though more money is flowing to Afghanistan, it is still hard to ensure that its benefits reach the people who need it and achieves results that Afghans can see. Michel will be waiting to see how the new Afghan government establishes itself and how it performs.

¶5. (C) Michel said that the United States has a historic role to play in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. President Obama has created the hope that a more effective path to peace can be found. Michel is particularly concerned about the settlements problem and its effect on relations between the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority.

¶6. (C) The Ambassador told Michel that he is pleased to find a number of areas where they share common views. He said

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that he too is concerned that there are 2300 rapes a month in the Eastern Congo despite the presence of MONUC. Now that Secretary Clinton has made the issue a priority, a new approach is required, he said. He offered to transmit any ideas that Belgium has to the State Department in Washington. Similarly, he said, the current period is a historic time and presents an opportunity for President Obama to get it right and solve the problems in the Middle East. The President's Cairo speech created a basis for a new approach, he said.

¶7. (C) The Ambassador urged Michel to take advantage of Belgium's strategic location in Europe and its hosting of the European Union and show leadership on issues such as Afghanistan, Guantanamo, Congo and others. He continued that Europe was ahead of the United States in recognizing the need to close the Guantanamo prison, and that the United States is grateful to Belgium for taking the one detainee it has taken so far. Unfortunately, he said, there is a possibility that the President's deadline for closure of Guantanamo will not be met because of the difficulties in finding suitable destinations for the detainees. He suggested that Belgium could, if it wished, call for European countries to work together to close Guantanamo with a concerted effort.

¶8. (C) The Ambassador said that President Obama is now studying the situation in Afghanistan and will soon announce an agreed strategy. Already many coalition partners are signaling their readiness to support an intensified effort there, he said. The President recognizes that the problems in Afghanistan cannot be solved by a military effort alone and that the civilian development component is equally important. Assistance must be appropriately targeted, he said, and should help the Afghan government to gain the faith of its people. He said that he sees Belgium at the head of Europe, and looks forward to working with Michel and his government on win-win strategies that will create a better planet. Michel agreed with the Ambassador that they both share many of the same views and concluded the meeting by saying that he looks forward to continuing the contacts begun at this meeting.

¶9. (C) The meeting with Michel was the first the Embassy has

been able to secure with the Development Minister, despite the key role he plays in formulating policy on Belgium's assistance to Afghanistan and Central Africa, two regions of interest to the USG. Michel has the reputation of being very closely associated with his father, Louis Michel, a francophone politician, MR party leader, and a former Belgian foreign minister and European Union Commissioner. Michel, however, was self-confident, relaxed, friendly and adequately briefed for the meeting on issues that the Ambassador could be expected to raise. Although he seemed to understand and to speak English well, he preferred to speak in French with translation when speaking on substance. Although the Ambassador laid out a vision of a Belgium that has the capacity to take on a leadership role in Europe, Michel ended the meeting without comment on that concept. Embassy is hopeful that Michel will be more communicative with the Embassy in the future so that a more active dialogue on assistance, especially to Afghanistan, can be developed with him as well as with his staff.

GUTMAN

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